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JACK MCISAAC

Mr. McIsaac, a retired lawyer from Prince Albert, was a member of the CCF/NDP from its earliest days. He knew Malcolm Norris through the party and through his legal practice.

HIGHLIGHTS:

- Prince Albert in the 1920s.
- The early days of the CCF.
- Malcolm Norris, his politics and his style.

Murray: I am talking to Jack McIsaac of Prince Albert. Mr. McIsaac, you knew Malcolm Norris both from his association and yours with the CCF party and in your capacity as a lawyer.

Jack: Yes.

Murray: You've mentioned that you became good friends with Malcolm. Could you describe the character of the man and how you felt about him?

Jack: Well, you only had to meet him a few times to realize that he was absolutely sincere in everything he did and

absolutely honest too. And he had a marvelous manner for getting to know you and for you to know him. I would say that he'd get to trust a person and if he didn't trust you, he wouldn't have much to do with you. And he had a certain amount of humor about him. For example, when he'd come into my office at any time, and it was usually in my office that I met him, quite often he'd say to me, "How are the palefaces this morning?" Well, after a little banter like that, we'd get down to do some work. And various times on shares and stuff that he had or had something to do with, he brought all the work to me, I think. As far as I know, I think he brought all his work to me and I got to know him very well. I even went out shooting with him a few times and we took this fellow, oh what was his name. I think I have the file with me. I need my glasses.

(break in tape)

Jack: Yes, he and...

Murray: Norris and Moberly.

Jack: This fellow here that we're talking about.

Murray: Moberly?

Jack: No, no.

Murray: Malcolm.

Jack: Malcolm Norris, Malcolm Norris and I and Moberly went out shooting. Moberly was then very old because he had been a soldier in the Boer War and I knew Moberly very well apart from that because I did work for him.

Murray: Was he a native person, Moberly?

Jack: Yes, he belonged to this, born around here.

Murray: Oh yes, I know the name.

Jack: He was the same as Malcolm was. He was Metis. And I must say if I get off the subject, that I never saw anything like him to shoot. He must have been... I don't know whether he'd be in his late seventies or his early eighties. But he'd raise the gun as though he had all day to raise it, not a bit of hurry or anything, and you would think he was out of range. First thing, the duck or whatever he was shooting at would drop. You don't mind me diversing here about Moberly for a minute.

Murray: Go ahead.

Jack: Moberly and another fellow... Moberly had claims in the north and he was developing them and prospecting as well. So this fellow was going with him and he did go with him and he was with him either in the fall or winter staking claims. But he told me when he came back, he said, "It was far better for

me to spend that winter with Moberly than if I'd gone to college. I never saw anything like him. He'd tell you whether it was an Indian or a white man came down the road. He'd tell you whether it was an Indian or a white man who slept in a tent that night and he had a way of telling something by the ashes and by the way they slept and so on. And, he could read the stars." And he said, "I never saw anything like him." He said, "It was just as good as a college education to me." Well, Moberly lived here and they were a very famous family in that respect.

Murray: Was he a close friend of Norris's?

Jack: Yes, he must have been because it was he, Norris and us that went to shoot. I know they were out oftener than the times I was with them. And they seemed to be great friends. They naturally would be because they compensated each other.

Murray: When Norris came to you and you became good friends, did he talk to you often about politics of native people and the CCF?

Jack: Yes, he talked politics most of the time because he was an ardent man. In everything he took up, he was within his whole soul and energy, took it up like that. And he had a great way for finding out the news of the political status of the party, not only in Saskatchewan but in Alberta. You see,

he worked for the Alberta government for some years as a minister of resources, natural resources. And he was an able man in that respect and he was a man that didn't fear anybody. If he thought what he was saying was right, he'd say it, in front of anybody. Now he'd often say to members of the government here that they should do something else, they should handle the matters better than they were doing, or something like that.

Murray: Do you recall any particular instances of issues he took up with the government?

Jack: Well, it's long since...

Murray: It's quite a while.

Jack: And you see, I am ten years retired, ten and a half years retired. I lost all track of the things that used to interest me very much. Now, I content myself with reading stories. Many things... If that's off, I'll tell you.

(break in tape)

Murray: Could you talk a bit about some of the political discussions you had with Malcolm about, you know, within the CCF party. You were both members of the party.

Jack: Well, of course, the ordinary discussions we would have mainly would be what our party was doing and if they were doing

right and this and that and so on. And we were pretty well of the opinion, both of us, that the government of Douglas was exceptionally good. We found that here was the Liberal party

and the Conservative party too had been in for years. And the natural resources man, his name at that time was Kerr ("Keer" as the Scotch call it). And he was in, I think, before the CCF got in. I think he was natural resources minister. But he'd come up here, fly up north to Ile-a-la-Crosse and Beauval and all here. He'd come back and he'd usually stop in Prince Albert or perhaps Saskatoon. He'd say, "Everything is fine up there. They are getting along fine and there is great progress made in the north." But what was it? We never heard what the progress was. Did they mine gold? Did they mine coal? Did they catch fish, did they organize it? What did they do about the trees? Was there any of that manufactured or things like this done or was any of our fish manufactured in the north? Nothing, not a word about any of this.

Well, immediately the CCF got into power under Douglas, he formed a commission and went after the logging and the manufacturing of lumber in the north. You see, the lumbering was held by foreign companies all the time. For example, I got here in 1922 but in 1919 the mill that they had down in the east end (there is relics of it still there), this mill closed. And when I came here in 1922, there was 300 houses or more, perhaps 350 without a soul in them. They were all shut up. The only place that was standing was an old Hudson's Bay brick store.

Murray: This was in Prince Albert.

Jack: That was in Prince Albert. That was called Goshen at that time; now it's called East Prince Albert. And so when I come in here... oh, and many houses on the hill. You see, two people were working the mill. And I had all these people that owned blocks phone me up and say, "We'll give you meals and everything for such a price." Even the Empress Hotel which

was the best one in town phoned me and they said, "We'll give you twenty-one meals for seven dollars." Twenty-one meals. I had several phones, people that owned blocks, you see, "We'll give you a room for so much a month. Seventeen dollars a month," or something. Yeah, it was about seventeen a month or something. And some of the large houses up on the hill were vacant and times were tough as blazes. The, what was called at that time foreigners and to some extent yet, they were in the surrounding country here and most of them, while wonderful immigrants, they were in terrible shape. Their houses were built of this poplar and wedged in with sand or a little bit of lime in them too. And usually one or two rooms. Mostly one. And they had large families. And at that time, this is not to be put into this at all. Is this going?

Murray: Yeah.

Jack: There was a lot of unfriendliness among the people. Not

necessarily between the Poles and Norwegians but very often among themselves. And there was an awful lot of law. They would be in for some little thing that happened and times were bad. You couldn't say that they were dishonest or anything because nobody had much money then, nobody.

Murray: What role did the CCF play in that period?

Jack: The CCF weren't mentioned then. The CCF weren't mentioned until ten years later, 1932. They had their first meeting, I think it was in Calgary, either Calgary or Regina. And about 1932 or 1933, I happened to be up at Devil's Lake. Do you know where Devil's Lake is?

Murray: Yeah.

Jack: Well, I happened to be camping there with my wife and kids, they were then. And one of the fellows came to me and he says, "There is a new party here starting up a cause." I says, "Oh, yes. How'd you come to know this?" "Well," he says, "they had a meeting, they had a meeting in..."

Murray: Calgary in 1932?

Jack: No, they had a meeting in a village west of Dundurn. Are you familiar with that country?

Murray: Vaguely.

Jack: What?

Murray: Not very familiar, no. Anyway.

Jack: Yeah, they had a meeting at... He said the man that spoke said that if you have three quarters of land, or two, if you have a half section of land, you'll have to give one quarter to your neighbor, and if you have a section of land, you'll have to give two quarters away and...

Murray: Who was saying this?

Jack: This fellow that attended the meeting. I forget what his name was now but he farmed around that community at Devil's Lake. Well, I knew that a man wouldn't get very far with that, knowing how dear the land was to everybody here and they were all living off it. Well, that was the first time I heard of

the party and so I wrote. Then I heard later on it was called the Farm Labour Party. It wasn't called the CCF first.

Murray: Right.

Jack: And so I heard who the secretary of the Labour party was - he was a Norwegian - and I wrote to him and told him what I heard. And I said if they pursue that, it would be very dangerous, they wouldn't get very far. He wrote me and told me

that that wasn't so at all and gave me a good solid talk on what was the aims of the party. And he was an able man although he only probably went beyond grade three in Norway. He knew political economy just as good if not better than many of the professors.

Murray: I don't want to interrupt your story Mr. McIsaac but maybe we could get back to Malcolm Norris and the time that he and you were in the party. This would have been after, you know, in the early fifties when you first met Norris or...?

Jack: Well, it would be. I'm sure I hadn't met him in 1944. I don't think I had anyway. It was only when he got into the government that I got to know him.

Murray: He first arrived in 1946, I think.

Jack: In 1946, did he? Well, it wouldn't be so long after that before he got to know me because I was very active in there and really had quite a bit to do with the organizing of the thing.

Murray: Did his views on the party develop or change at all from the first time you knew him into the sixties?

Jack: Oh, he was an ardent socialist then. He didn't care whether it was CCF or what it was, he was a socialist. Well, we were really socialists although a lot of us didn't call ourselves that. We were actually, in action, we were actually socialists. And the man that was leading the socialist party at that time, and wasn't afraid of the word socialist, was George Williams. You didn't know him.

Murray: No. I know the name but I...

Jack: Well, he was one of the brightest men I have met and I heard the same story by several others. The first time I met him, the secretary wrote me that he'd be coming up and he'd like me to look after him if I would. Of course I was in deep in the CCF, about a year's work, somewhere like that.

Murray: Was Norris actually involved in the party himself as well or...?

Jack: Oh yes, he was. He didn't care a straw who knew it.

Murray: Did you work with Norris at all in terms of in the party? Was he active in forming party policy, those kinds of things?

Jack: Well, I don't know if he went to Regina to the conventions. I don't think he did. I don't think he aligned himself that much with it. But he was always talking it. He didn't care who he talked to, he was always the same about that.

Murray: He considered himself an activist in the party did he?

Jack: Yes, he did, he did. And one that never changed either.

Murray: Did he become disillusioned at all with the party as the years went by? Did he feel that the party was still a viable party as a socialist party in the sixties that he did in the fifties? Do you know if his views changed at all?

Jack: Well, I think he had the idea that they weren't going far enough but still I think he always thought they were doing far superior work than the parties that preceded them.

Murray: Do you recall any party meetings that Norris might have attended that discussed policy?

Jack: I can't say that I did. The only meeting that I told you he was at was that meeting where we were up in arms, at least some of us were. Because we had born the brunt of the whole thing for years without any assistance from anyone. And we thought that he should be with us rather than appear to be something else. You see, in a way you couldn't blame him. That's MacIntosh. For the simple reason that when he was a Wheat Pool man, he was acting for all the political parties, all of them. Liberals, Conservatives, CCF and Social Credit. The Social Credit were in here then at that time pretty strong. And you could hardly blame the fellow that was schooled in that for quite a few years, but anyway, we figured that by calling his attention to it, we would speed up his work. As a representative of us, as a representative of the party.

Murray: You can't recall at all, any of Norris's activities in the party. Was he an activist in the party or was he simply a supporter of it in terms of elections?

Jack: Well, I'll put it this way. He was an activist because he talked it all the time to people here and there. He probably was far more potent than if he had called a meeting in Prince Albert and a meeting in Shellbrook and Big River and so on. He talked to the individuals all the time. And he made no bones of his position. Even if he came into the strongest man in opposition or woman, he made clear his views; and to that extent, I would say he was a very great activist.

Murray: How did other people see Malcolm Norris?

Jack: Regard him? Well, he was such a lovable character that I think most of the people, most of the people outside his own party loved him just as much as those within. I think the average man appreciates a fellow that comes out straight and there is no quibbling about it and so on, and he was in that class. He was in that class. I think everybody liked him. I don't know anyone that disliked him. He was a favorite with everybody. He didn't make any bones about who this fellow was or who that fellow was or anything else.

Murray: Do you recall any incidents in which Norris was

arguing politically or some of the issues that he felt were important, about the north or about native people?

Jack: Well, the point was that I can't say I ever saw him in a crowd. But if he was in a crowd or he stepped into this house tomorrow and there was five or six people here, he would set up his own views absolutely no matter who they were, and I think I saw him do that a few times. I can't recall now when or who were there but I think I saw him doing that but I know he'd do it anyway. I'd expect it of him and I wouldn't be at all surprised. He wasn't any fellow that came into a house, we'll say, where they're all of a different party, and he'd keep his mouth shut and be as mum as possible. He wasn't that. But he wasn't offensive. He'd always put it over in a nice manner, a very nice manner. And if he was thinking something very harsh, he'd put it over with a joke.

Murray: Was he a humorous man as well?

Jack: Yes, he was humorous in this way. It was very often connected with race. He would be joking with 'palefaces.' Usually the palefaces were connected with it. No, he was humorous. He was a man that wasn't mum at any time at all. He saw the good side of life and the happy side as well.

Murray: How do you think he saw his Indian heritage?

Jack: Proud of it. Proud beyond talking. Very proud of it and he was proud of his family. He was proud of this son that was going to college, studying in the east. I'm just wondering what... he was studying for an engineer.

Murray: Geology, geological engineer, I think.

Jack: Oh, geological engineer, I see. He was very proud of him but he was proud of his daughters and he was proud of everybody. Proud of his wife. He was a man that had all the qualities that you couldn't help but love.

Murray: What kind of relationship did you have with him? You say you became a close friend. Did he talk a lot about his personal life, about his past, his childhood, those kinds of things at all?

Jack: Well, when he was with me, he very often was talking politics to a large extent. Or talking about his subject like mining. He was interested in mining and he knew a lot more about mining than, oh, anyone I would say, perhaps anyone in the province for that matter. Because he was not only in the government as a man in the forefront of the thing, telling them where they were at and what they found and the value of it and the width and depth of it and so on and he was a very valuable man. I'm sure that perhaps there was nobody in Saskatchewan that knew his natural resources business better than he did. Especially in mining.

Murray: You mentioned earlier that he sometimes felt that the CCF was not going far enough. Do you recall any particular area that he thought they should be moving more quickly or more aggressively?

Jack: I can't recall that. I don't think, but...

Murray: Was he most interested in northern issues and issues affecting native people or was he more broadly interested in what the CCF was doing?

Jack: He was certainly broadly interested in what the CCF was doing and he was anxious that they'd go ahead faster but you could always see a reason for a government holding back too. For example, we might say now that our government should go right ahead and get this potash done and finished with. Not fool around with it any longer. Well, on the other hand, the premier of the province may see things may not be obstacles, but things that affect other lines of communication, so to speak. That it's better for them to go more slowly than to burst into this and probably make bad friends or something like that.

Murray: Is this the kind of conversation you used to have with Malcolm? Did you put that position forward, that things had to go more slowly?

Jack: No, I never did that because I'm very much like Norris myself. I want the thing to move and I'm always in favor of moving and I've been thinking that since confederation we have been....

(End of Side A)

(End of Interview)

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